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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research study was conducted at one alternative high school to examine why traditional high school dropouts attend alternative schools. Data were gathered over three stages of research during a 2-year period. Sources of data included 105 hours of site observations, student interviews, and the review of site documents. The data revealed that the students at the alternative high school had established a significant level of informal control. Four major assertions were supported by the data: (1) students experienced greater freedom than they had previously experienced at a traditional high school; (2) student choice had a positive impact on the effectiveness of the alternative school; (3) students monitored and adjusted individual student behavior in relation to acceptable group behavior; and (4) students enjoyed the experiences of success while attending the alternative school. Based on findings of the study, it is recommended that alternative schools be supported while traditional schools are being reformed; that the effectiveness of alternative and traditional schools be improved by listening to the needs of dropouts; that alternative school advisory committees be trained in listening to such needs; that efforts by alternative school faculty in advocating for the needs of dropouts be supported; that traditional school faculty and administrators be trained in listening to and understanding the needs of potential dropouts; and that community social policymakers be involved in understanding the issues surrounding the high school dropout problem. (NB)

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TRADITIONAL HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY AT AN ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL

By

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A COMMUNITY PROBLEM:

Some argue that traditional schools engage in various strategies that push out undeserving youth. In a sense, dropouts are the result of an accepted practice. Limited resources within the school represents the justification to divide the student population according to worth. The school 'system' thus becomes the deciding force as to which student is worth more than another. This process, coupled with a growing public interest in quality education, translates into the "best" students receiving first option on available resources. Does the traditional school place a high priority on meeting the needs of the "best" students? The contention here is that many alternative programs exist within communities only because such programs do not drain resources away from the "best" students.

The role of the alternative school thus is to take the less desirable youth so that the traditional high school may fulfill its mission with the "best" youth. A community would, therefore, be willing to allow alternative programming in addition to the established traditional high school. How all of this is viewed by the young person may well be expressed in different terms. The one being "pushed out" of the traditional high school is in a different world from that of the educator responding to the priorities of the community.

INTRODUCTION:

This study focuses on understanding why traditional school dropouts are attending school. Policymakers are offered the viewpoints of students who attend an alternative high school. This information, obtained through qualitative data analysis, is scientifically sound, and as such can support a more informed social policymaking process. By increasing our understanding of youth at an alternative school, the effectiveness of the alternative high school as an intervention strategy is revealed. Mayer and Greenwood (1980) conclude:

> Evaluations based on effectiveness are particularly appropriate in school planning, where the knowledge needed to predict effects is less well developed. (p. 14)

As such, policymakers who understand why some young people need educational alternatives will be better able to plan for the needs of all youth.

The essential elements of a two year qualitative dissertation on traditional high school dropouts are represented in this paper. Two key questions were formed during the study:

1. Why do traditional school dropouts attend an alternative school?

2. How does student control impact the effectiveness of an alternative school?

Findings and conclusions will address these questions and further explore the impact of qualitative research upon program development.

The research perspective of this study is the identification of significant educational issues from the traditional high school dropout's point of view. Students attending an alternative high school represent a population of young people who have dropped out of traditional education. Employing qualitative research techniques in this natural setting supported the primary goal by providing a means to further understand the multidimensional social issue of dropping out of the traditional high school. Further, by focusing on a research population within an alternative educational setting, the line of inquiry was able to encompass questions of effectiveness and program development in relation to social policy.

DEFINING THE ISSUE:

Stafford and Warr (1985) concluded from their research on public perceptions of social problems that people must consider a phenomena, such as students dropping out of school, mutable before it is considered a major social problem:

> We have shown that the degree to which different phenomena are considered social problems is a function of the social condemnation, perceived frequency, and perceived mutability of those phenomena. Social condemnation and perceived frequency are both positively related to the perceived magnitude of social problems, but the effect of perceived mutability is strongly contingent on the type of problem. (p. 314)

Social deviance and mutability is based on the belief that afflicted youth should be quarantined so that the problem does not infect healthy students. In this scenario, the dropout is

viewed as the problem. Ryan, in his book Blaming the Victim (1976), considered this a cultural weakness:

> We cannot comfortably believe that we are the cause of that which is problematic to us; therefore, we are almost compelled to believe that they-the problematic ones-are the cause and this immediately prompts us to search for deviance. (p. 13)

Ryan (1976) cautioned that research which recommends changes for the victim distorts reality:

> And the task to be accomplished is not to revise, and amend, and repair deficient children but to alter and transform the atmosphere and operations of the schools to which we commit these children. Only by changing the nature of the educational experience can we change its product. (p. 61)

The dropout problem is defined and identified by the social institution of education. A perceived behavior of deviance and mutability of dropouts is also generated from within education. This one-sided viewpoint creates an unrealistic perception. By studying the victim's perspective, a more realistic presentation of the characteristics of dropouts can be achieved. Characteristics of dropouts provide the means to see who the dropout is. Why this person dropped out is a question which the social institution of education must answer realistically. An understanding of the dropout's characteristics represents an essential research step toward that end.

The long-term implications of underemployment and unemployment clearly demonstrate a high cost to society. This cost is not only felt by the high school dropout but by society

in general. Former Labor Secretary Brock (1986) suggested economic stability in the year 2000 is dependent on a properly trained work force. "Each year American Schools turn out 700,000 functionally illiterate graduates and an equal number of mostly illiterate dropouts" (p. 3). His concern was "a lack of basic learning skills could keep workers from adapting to new technology in the work place and lead to a shortage of skilled labor in this country by the year 2000" (Brock, 1986, p. 3). Hodgkinson (Institute for Educational Leadership, 1985) went further in his assessment, "We are more aware than ever that if large numbers of youth fail in school and work, the consequences for us all are severe" (p. 11).

The cost to society of high school dropouts, therefore, involves defining a social problem as a threat to the present social order. Characteristics of high school dropouts can clarify this definition. By using comparisons to define a social problem, other social issues are introduced. The societal response to the problem then becomes a political process of deciding how to respond to multiple problems with limited resources.

Effective high school dropout intervention strategies ultimately serve the needs of society. Determining what those needs are however requires a thorough understanding of the problem from a number of perspectives. By combining strategies which address the needs of both the dropout and the school, greater opportunity for success is obtained. An understanding of

this process is essential to overcome inherent resistance to effective intervention strategies. Sizer (1985) described this barrier to change as follows:

> Trying to change one piece affects every other, causing all sorts of political flak. Accordingly, things remain the same because it is very difficult to change very much without changing most of everything. The result is sustained paralysis. (p. 211)

Combining the needs of the dropout with the resources of the schools complements efforts at overcoming "sustained paralysis." Local educational intervention strategies must understand the complexity of the dropout problem to be effective. Young people may be able to help concerned educators toward such an understanding.

As educators seek an understanding of the forces impacting the dropout, inquiry turns to the actions of the youth. Research has typically focused on the dropouts themselves rather than on the educational system. By considering a youth's self-control, more may be revealed about both the dropout and the school.

The concept of self-control encompasses a number of influences which potentially impact the youth's decision to drop out of school. This concept of self-control is defined by Rotter (Lefcourt, 1982) as "locus of control."

Based on a literature review in the area of locus of control, Riter (1984) described this sense of control perceived by students:

> It is important to realize that if a person recognizes little relationship between his/her actions and their outcomes, then a feeling of helplessness may occur. From this feeling of helplessness, it often follows

> that passive acceptance of failure, or aversive stimuli occurs. On the other hand, a student who perceives control over him/herself and the world around him/her will likely strive more adamantly for 'valued reinforcements' whether they be money or grades. (p. 16)

The behavior of students may be affected by their perception of control over the events in the school. In a sense, control within the school may offer the incentive for some youth to stay in school rather than drop out.

By examining the locus of control orientation of traditional school dropouts, much can be learned. Both the self-esteem and academic success of at-risk students can be related to locus of control. A positively developed self-esteem is shown to support an internal locus of control. Success through academic achievement also enhances this internal orientation. By correcting an external locus of control orientation, a more comprehensive intervention strategy is established. An end result of fewer problem students dropping out may be achieved by schools helping young people realize control.

RESEARCH METHODS:

A qualitative research study was conducted at Coolidge Alternative High School. For the purposes of research confidentiality, the site name is a pseudonym. The city public school system serves approximately 3,500 students. Coolidge enrolls an average of 40 alternative students per semester. The typical student at Coolidge has dropped out of traditional high

school, is 16 to 18 years old, caucasian, and has rural transportation problems.

Research data was gathered during three-stages of research, over a two year period of time. Sources of data included site observations, student interviews (which can best be described as an unstructured series of open-ended questions) and the review of site documents. During Stage One of this study, 12 weeks of research was conducted during January, February and March 1986. Stage Two research was conducted at the same site in January and February 1987. Both first-and second-stage data were analyzed for the formulation of dissertation findings. An additional five-day period in May, 1987 was used as Stage Three to test findings which had been developed during Stages One and Two.

Site observations during all three stages of on-site data gathering totaled 105 hours. From this contact, a total of 183 typed pages of notes and 139 pages of typed transcribed interviews were compiled. Additionally, site documents and photographic documentation with 55 slides were gathered for triangulation analysis.

During Stage One pilot research, a number of assertions were developed. Using the admonition from field research lectures that the researcher should "change as much as you can," the various assertions underwent continual revision. As a means to support the change process, I varied my methods of data collection. Observations were conducted in the hallway, men's room, parking lot, gymnasium, school office, and all three of the

classrooms. Conversations with the teachers, secretaries, program administrator, and community agency staff also provided different perspectives. From these numerous sources, the research techniques which were employed during Stages Two and Three evolved.

Self-analysis of researcher bias also improved by returning to the research site. With the researcher as the sole research instrument in gathering data at the site, constant self-monitoring was necessary. By returning to the same site throughout three stages of research, I was able to compare my role as a participant observer. During Stage Three, data collection was further enhanced by shifting myself on the participant observer continuum. A qualitative researcher may freely assume the more active role of a participant or the passive role of an observer. I became more active as a participant student by taking four examinations and sitting in a different student seat each class hour. Although the amount of time committed during Stage Three was confined to one week, the research goal was also limited to testing existing data from a different point on the continuum. This format also offered the opportunity to examine the research site for an intensive single block of time. As a result of these various data gathering strategies, assertions underwent constant revision to accurately reflect the evidence. Findings and conclusions drawn from this research were, therefore, significantly strengthened and refined.

The conversion of raw data into evidence began in earnest as preparation for the preliminary report. This same approach was maintained throughout the dissertation. Field notes and transcribed interviews were coded according to repetitive topics. The repetition of topics is found as the researcher becomes increasingly familiar with the raw data. After several overview readings of field notes and transcribed interviews, I was able to identify reoccurring topics. This time-consuming process allows the data to present the evidence rather than the researcher seeking out a predetermined perspective.

Patterns within each topic and between topics were then analyzed. A number of charts, tables, and diagrams were used to represent various paths of inquiry. These visual references were effective analytical tools. In each case, I summarized some aspect of the evidence. I then compared the visual reference to the body of evidence surrounding a given topic or, in some cases, multiple topics. By so doing, I could better see relationships of evidence. As a result of using these visual references, the analysis of patterns was considerably strengthened. None of the charts, tables, or diagrams, though, accurately represented the total body of evidence and, therefore, are not presented as findings in this study.

FINDINGS and CONCLUSIONS:

This study found that the students at the alternative high school have established a significant level of informal control. Additionally, four major assertions are supported:

1. These students experience greater freedom than they previously experienced at a traditional high school.

2. Student choice has a positive impact on the effectiveness of the alternative school.

3. Students, as a group, monitor and adjust individual student behavior in relation to acceptable group behavior.

4. Students enjoy the experience of success while attending the alternative school.

An involvement between the teacher and the student stands out in this evidence. Interaction between the students and teachers is informal in that the rights and obligations identified here are perceived by the students as significant. No formal rules are referenced by the students as controlling teacher and student interaction. The interaction is, therefore, dependent on an informal perception of the acceptable roles played by both the students and the teachers. Students maintain this balance by monitoring and adjusting their behavior. As a result, Coolidge is an effective alternative high school for these traditional high school dropouts.

Through participation at Coolidge, these students have exercised a form of control over their actions. An overarching theme thus is revealed that the students at Coolidge have

established a significant level of informal control within the school. Major assertions concerning freedom, choice, behavior, and success support this overarching theme. By analyzing the evidence in this detailed manner, a framework of investigation is applied. A look at the attendance practices and policies at Coolidge demonstrates this process.

Compliance with school attendance policy varied with individual youth on a day-to-day basis. However, the vast majority of the students at Coolidge consistently used as many available absence days as permitted. This practice is an example of informal student control. Three years ago, Coolidge began an alternative high school program with a maximum of 10 days absent per semester. Last year, the policy was changed to 15 days. Currently, the policy is remaining at last year's level. However, a stricter enforcement of tardies is resulting in a loss against the 15 day ceiling. Last year, students were allowed to make-up tardies by staying after class. Teachers decided that the tardies were being abused by the students so the policy was changed. This year, tardies are recorded as a partial absence. The formal policy responded to the informal practices of the students.

The attendance policy was under constant pressure by the students during Stage One research. Observation of student resistance to the attendance policy was recorded on 37 separate occasions. Teacher response to attendance policy enforcement was recorded on 35 occasions. This high number of observations

suggests that the students consider the issue a significant point. An administrator at Coolidge was annoyed by the continual student pressure on the policy. He remarked, "They know they have 15 and will take it right to the limit." With two weeks remaining until the end of the school year, one of the teachers explained that only 3 out of 40 students in the school were under a 12-day absent rate. The teacher went on to say that one of these three students made plans to use up all available days. Student behavior, in using the maximum allowable days absent, was viewed by the students as the norm and by the school administration and teachers as undesirable. Negotiating by the students is demonstrated here through informal student behavior. Both teachers and students acknowledged that the attendance policy was annoying. Yet both groups continued to function cooperatively in the school environment. Formally, an attendance policy is in place. However, informally, students demonstrate control by pressuring the teachers and administration for a more lenient policy.

Informal student control was shown by student behavior in response to the attendance policy. Changes in the formal policy represent efforts to address the needs of these students. At the same time, the formal policy must reflect the position of the community as defined by the local board of education. Coolidge teachers therefore are in the middle of the negotiation process.

The concept of informal control can be seen also as a process of students expressing themselves. During Stage Three research, one of the students showed me her assignment for creative writing class. The weekly writing topic asked students to describe what they liked about Coolidge. Students were also encouraged to point out what they would like to see changed. The teacher provided me with copies of the students' work. Of the seven papers, all considered Coolidge a school they enjoyed. Particular points raised included:

> The teachers care and try to help you.
> The smoke room helps relieve tension.
> Students feel good about themselves.

Conversely, students felt some aspects of the alternative school could be improved. These included:

> Weekly group-counseling sessions should be resumed.
> The image of Coolidge should be improved.
> Attendance and tardy policies should be more lenient.
> More community support should be built.

In reviewing the students' papers, more evidence was presented of informal student control. By expressing their concerns through a class assignment, these seven students have provided yet another example of informal control. The strengths of Coolidge are reflected in the friendly relationships with the teachers and the freedoms that students enjoy. Stated areas of improvement identify the same points which the students seek to change through informal control. As Marsha pointed out in her paper, "I really believe this school will make it if the teachers

and, mostly, the students try to keep it going." Marsha acknowledged the presence of informal control by the students.

#1 Freedom to Negotiate

Students at Coolidge experience greater freedom than they previously experienced at a traditional high school.

One example of such freedom is student consumption of pop and snacks during class. A pop machine, located in the smoking room at the end of the hall, was provided for the students' use. Students also brought bottles of pop from home or purchased pop from area stores during lunch hour. Empty bottles and cans were stacked in the corner closet of one of the classrooms. Teachers occasionally asked students to pick up empties; however, no restriction on the consumption of pop was observed. Traditional high school structure around refreshments is significantly more restrictive according to the students.

A 10-minute break between classes, as opposed to a 5-minute break at the traditional school, is also mentioned by the students as a distinction of Coolidge from the traditional high school. An important aspect of these ten-minute breaks, however, is the observation that the students experienced the freedom of access to a smoking room. Standing-room-only in the smoke room was consistently the case during every break time observation of Stage One research.

Teachers are involved indirectly in various student freedoms. Observations of pop and snack use led to a specific

look at control of the empty pop bottles and cans. A total of sixteen observations focused on behavior and practices involving pop empties at Coolidge. The empties storage closet was in Jeff's classroom. When a sufficient number had accumulated, the students returned the empties for deposit refund money which was used to cover special student activities. Planning for the activity appeared to be initiated by the teacher, Jeff. Typically, the subject would be introduced by Jeff about one week prior to a favorable date. In one such conversation, a group of students strongly advocated their choice of activity. "We are going to get pizza, no bowling or roller skating." Based on observations, clearly the choice of the students was a Friday pizza party lunch followed by an afternoon of volleyball.

On one occasion, I observed a note was taped to the empties that read "Stop Stealing Cans." When I asked about it, Jeff said that he had written the note. Student theft of the empties had occurred the previous semester and Jeff suspected that empties were again being taken. Last semester, Jeff had told a group of students that the cans were everyone's property and that it is up to the students to enforce compliance. As a teacher, Jeff was attempting to change the behavior of the can-stealing students. Student group pressure following last semester's occurrence was viewed strong enough to cause one student to make restitution to the pop empties fund and for another student to quit attending school. A structure for storing the empties and planning pizza parties was maintained by Jeff; however, selecting the activity

and compliance to acceptable behavior had become the responsibility of the students.

During an interview with Chuck and Jim, both students referred to the theft of empties. As we discussed student freedom at Coolidge, Chuck mentioned that he was kicked out for poor attendance but allowed to return. Jim responded to this point by using the empties theft as an example.

Jim: I'm glad they kicked a few people out last semester that shouldn't have really been here, like Jack. We had them pop cans saved up in there and he took them. Jack, and I can't remember who else it was.

Chuck: Dennis.

Jim: Yea, Dennis. They took the pop and they...What did they use it for?

Chuck: Drugs.

Jim: Yea. They went and got a couple of joints or something.

Chuck: And the teachers really can't do nothing about it because it's our money.

Jim: It's our pop cans. But it kinda gets us mad.

Chuck: They wouldn't show up for a while.

Not only did Jim and Chuck support this example from their perspective, but in addition, the parameters to student freedom were demonstrated. Student responsibilities are associated with freedom, such as attendance and respect of the empties collection. Although Jeff may maintain a degree of decision-

making control, the students consider the empties collection as one of their freedoms. In this example, the students referred to the empties as "our money." Deciding how to spend the money is ultimately the students' decision. When Jack and Dennis stole the empties, the students at Coolidge applied peer pressure. This informal control is made possible through the interaction of student freedoms at Coolidge. The freedoms involved in this example included drinking pop, saving the empties, selecting the activity, and enforcing acceptable student behavior.

#2 Student Choice

Student choice has a positive impact on the effectiveness of Coolidge.

The first major assertion showed how students at Coolidge have more freedom than what they experienced at the traditional high school. In this second major assertion, evidence is presented which builds on the concept of student freedom. Student choice represents the specific application of freedom in a way which complements the effectiveness of Coolidge.

During Stage One, when I listened to Sam, a student, talk about how he compared the traditional high school to Coolidge, I only grasped part of the message. Instead of asking, "Why do you attend Coolidge?", I was asking, "Is Coolidge really easier?" Sam responded:

> It is up to the person, how hard it is. Um, if you want a comparison between the two, it's easier over here. People over at the high school who are well educated have a field day over here. Well then again, then you gotta put up with all the noise in there too.

> But myself, I like it because it's a more relaxed atmosphere.

My perspective kept me from understanding the full meaning of Sam's message. Even though I only asked one question, Sam answered both. Sam's perception of choice is presented here as a positive comparison between Coolidge and the traditional high school. Sam preferred the atmosphere of Coolidge over that of the high school. By choosing Coolidge, Sam had expressed a personal commitment. This commitment was evidenced through attendance and demonstrates a significant choice made by a dropout.

Choice is a category of evidence which the students repeatedly mentioned. During Stage Two research, data-gathering focused on the question: How does student control impact the effectiveness of Coolidge? This question revealed a distinct path of evidence.

One year later, during Stage Two research, I interviewed Chuck a second time. Given the question, "What do you have control over at Coolidge?" Chuck responded:

> If the teacher gives me an assignment, I could say, 'Why don't I just wait until tomorrow and do today's and tomorrow's assignment.' And he'll say, 'Okay, as long as you get it done.'
>
> Because he knows I'll get it done. If it was a new student he might just say, 'Get your work done.'
>
> Well, I can decide if I want to do it, or what I want to do. But I really can't say, 'No, I'm not gonna do it.' Because, then I don't have a right to be here. That's mostly what you have control over is yourself. Cause everybody here is totally different from the next person.

This interview with Chuck demonstrated several interesting points. The most significant point is that Chuck was consistent in both interviews, even though a one- year period of time had passed. As Chuck phrased it during Stage One research:

> The way people talk, you have to come here, sit here for a few hours and then go home, and you pass, graduate that way. But you don't.

Chuck considered it his decision to come to Coolidge and to do the work. During Stage Two, Chuck held the same position. It was his decision if he wants to do the work. Chuck raised another point, though, by referring to his obligation to do the work. "If I don't do the work, then I don't have a right to be here." This was a lesson Chuck learned his first semester at Coolidge when he was kicked out. "I got up to fourteen absences without getting any more. Then I stopped going and they kicked me out. But they gave me my chance to come back." One other point of interest is that Chuck introduced a discrepancy and also justified the practice. Because he has attended Coolidge for two years, teachers permit him to establish his own assignment deadlines. Although this practice discriminated between first-year and second-year students, Chuck suggested that the second year student had established a record of performance.

Throughout Stage Two and Stage Three research, students consistently referred to choice when addressing the question of control. One exception to this occurred during my Stage Two interview with Ted. In response to the specific question "What control do you have at Coolidge?" Ted answered, "None." This

discrepancy, however, must be placed in context. Prior to this question, Ted and I had discussed at length a problem he was having at school. The day before our interview, Ted had been involved in a confrontation with a substitute teacher in third-hour class. Just prior to the interview, Ted had been sent downstairs to talk with the program administrator. In addition, Ted was questioned by Jeff regarding yesterday's behavior. Given this situation, Ted was viewing the question of control from an authoritarian context. Ted summarized his meeting with the program administrator:

> I mean, it's all up to Mr. Hammerly. And I don't know. He seems to be quite the headstrong type of guy, ya know. He didn't get into it. He just told me the way it was and that was it.

The only choice Ted saw when confronted by formal school authority is "either leave or take it."

In six additional Stage Two and Three interviews, students provide similar supporting documentation for this major assertion. One of the six students is Joann. She explained her perception of choice as follows:

> I learn something here. You want to learn something here. You know it's your choice to be here; where at the high school you're told, 'You've got to be here; you're either going to do my classes and do this thing or we're gonna do this to you.' Here, it is your choice; do it or not; it's your grade, your choice; it's your life.

These students believe that attending Coolidge is their choice. Through choice, a feeling of control over one's own direction emerges. As Joann suggested, by being allowed to make

choices, she is learning to control her life. It is not always easy. Students, like Chuck, at first get kicked out for not trying hard enough. Once you are enrolled in Coolidge, the teachers and students treat you like you are going to succeed. As Chuck said, "The only one that can stop you is you." In a similar case, Ben was kicked out of Coolidge a second time for poor attendance. Several students intervened on Ben's behalf, seeking permission for Ben to return. Although Ben was denied permission to complete the semester, he was permitted to re-enroll for the following semester. Ben had failed, tried again, had teacher and student support, yet failed again. The opinion of several students and Jeff, the teacher, was that Ben will succeed next semester. Dennis quit to raise a family. The students and teachers still wanted him back. Pregnant girls would rather stay than transfer to the pregnant teen program.

When Jerry tried to get into adult education, the other students harassed him for a month. According to Jeff, the students were offended that Jerry would consider choosing adult education over the alternative school. Jerry admitted he was only seeking an easier class schedule. By remaining at Coolidge, Jerry demonstrated that the temporary student harassment did not deter him from attending school. Given the options, Coolidge remained Jerry's first choice. Chuck looks back at his traditional high school experience and concluded, "People at the high school, it's getting to be like you have to be a robot; there's so many useless rules." Kevin would rather ride a school

bus for over two hours each way to attend Coolidge than return to his traditional high school. Even though the school day ends at 1:50 p.m., Kevin commented, "I don't get home 'til 4:15 p.m. And believe me, that bumpy ride can get awful boring." He explained to me why he was willing to do this:

> At Coolidge, you're given choices. You can play volleyball or come up to the room to study. You're always given choices. At [the high school], it's yes or no. The only choice is hot dog or hamburg at lunch.

This major assertion suggests that the choices associated with attending Coolidge demonstrate school effectiveness. It is the contention here that school effectiveness is achieved when traditional high school dropouts choose to participate in this alternative form of education. Without students, a school cannot be effective. Coolidge is demonstrating effectiveness through the choice of attendance made by students.

#3 Student Monitoring

> Students, as a group at Coolidge, monitor and adjust individual student behavior in relation to acceptable group behavior.

This assertion suggests a bonding of purpose among the students. Recognition that such group-processing exists is needed to show that informal student control is possible both as an individual and as part of a group. A teacher-structured situation such as the earlier example of the pop empties collection demonstrates formal control. Students, however, lack a formal voice in the day-to-day operations of the school. A degree of decision-making control by a teacher over the pop

deposit refund money was recorded on four separate occasions during Stage One research. In each of these cases, however, students demonstrated informal control over the process. Students evaluated Coolidge policies and rules in relation to personal and group rights. In the earlier example concerning the theft of pop empties, students perceived the loss of the collection as a threat to a student/group right: "No empties, no pizza."

As part of a student interview, Mary provided a vivid case which supported and clarified earlier discussion on the pop empties example. All three classes were having a Friday volleyball game followed by a pizza party. During the volleyball game, Jeff caught Mary and five other students in the smoke room. Jeff kicked all six students out of school for the remainder of the day. I asked Mary if she was allowed to stay for the pizza. She replied:

> No, we had got in a fight about that, me and Jeff. Well, all of us were yelling at him. He got pretty mad at us. . . . I told him I wanted my pop cans. Cause I buy at least three pops a day, and I figured I'm not buying their pizza if I can't have any.

According to Mary, the students at Coolidge did not agree with her viewpoint:

> Cause they didn't think that since we got kicked out, we shouldn't be getting our pizza. But we fixed them. We said we're taking our pop cans. Marsha and Darlene were going with me. So we were gonna take about five of those [cases], and they wouldn't have been able to get their pizza. Darlene was carrying them out to the car, and I said, 'I can't do this. Just forget it; take the cans up there.' She sat them on the floor, and she just said, 'We'll be back to get our pizza.' And Jeff said, 'No.' So we went down and talked to Mr.

> Hammerly [the program administrator] and he said it was up to Jeff. We came back up here and we were yelling at Jeff. Finally he said, 'OK, you can come back up and get your pizza, but you have to leave after you eat your pizza.' So we did. We came up here and sat and ate.

When I asked Jeff about the incident he explained that he had checked with the program administrator prior to confronting the students. Jeff did not like the confrontation. He reflected, "It didn't go well, and many of the students were just in a weird, Friday mood." Jeff also commented about the pizza; he thought it unusual that two pizzas were left over.

In this example, the formal authority of the teacher and the informal influence of students is evident. Based on a rule violation, Jeff levied sanctions against a small group of students. This group of students, however, challenged the teacher's position. The challenge was based on the students' control over the pop empties fund. The students attempted a formal appeal through the school administrator. That approach failed; so the students used informal pressure upon the teacher. Jeff did not care for the pressure and eventually accepted a compromise.

This example also demonstrates individual student behavior in relation to acceptable group behavior. Mary perceived how the larger group of students saw the situation. By not taking what she defined as her fair share of empties, she avoided a confrontation with the larger student group. In this situation, Mary considered it acceptable to challenge the teacher as long as

her actions did not violate the rights of the larger student group.

#4 Student Success

Students enjoy the experience of success at Coolidge.

Success in the classroom is commonly measured by the teacher through grades. Donna enjoyed the support she had from the teachers at Coolidge. "At the high school, they don't give a shit if you pass or not." Success emerges from the alternative school setting and offers students the opportunity to feel good about themselves. Debby shared this feeling with her mother:

> My grades went up. My Mom, she looked at my last report card, A's and B's, and she's really freaking out, ya know. At the high school, I got all E's, a couple D minuses.

High grades for Debby symbolized a success at school which she enjoyed. A very personal satisfaction was realized through this experience. Mark also felt better about himself since he began attending Coolidge:

> The work is the same at the high school, but I get As here. I didn't get A's at the high school because I didn't want to do anything.

Another interesting example came out of a Stage Three interview. Ed looked back at his high school experience and described various meetings he had with the principal and the superintendent. Ed felt he was accepted and successful at Coolidge. He explained, "At Coolidge I haven't been talked to by the principal yet. Yes, I think that's proof that I've been successful here." Debby, Mark, and Ed have assessed themselves

at Coolidge. Debby and Mark used grades and Ed used disciplinary meetings as benchmarks for success. Regardless of the measurement, all three of these students believe they are successful.

Student success also involves a commitment to achieve. For this to occur, the feeling of being successful needs to translate into student participation. Academic success, for example, generates a positive feeling of achievement. If students believe that participating at Coolidge results in success, then they are less likely to leave. This cause-and-effect statement is presented as an underlying premise of student participation at Coolidge. It is not the intent of this research to substantiate such a causal inference. Rather, its purpose is to show that the students do feel that they are successful at Coolidge. As mentioned earlier, this population of students share the characteristic of failure in the traditional high school setting. Donna expressed this sense of common student identity at Coolidge. "The students all understand that we are all labelled. We all feel that everybody has to be given a chance once."

If you are in a setting and experiencing failure, three options typically exist: (1) You may continue the experience, (2) change your approach, or (3) change to a different setting. It is the contention of this assertion that these students have demonstrated their preference for the third option. By seeking a chance for success in an alternative high school, these dropouts have changed from their traditional setting. If you are

experiencing failure in the traditional high school, you do not feel like you are successful. Ted recalled his struggle to succeed at the traditional high school. After quitting once and returning, Ted found school even more difficult. "The teachers just started getting crazy, they were really bogue to me then." Having successfully completed one-and-a-half years at Coolidge, Ted will graduate at the end of the semester. In a senior mock election, Ted was voted "Best Personality." Ted considered Coolidge:

> . . . a pretty good school. I mean, I don't mind going to school now. I get here and I don't feel like I have to leave. And we're not a bunch of dummies. I work harder here than I did at the high school.

Evidence presented as support for this major assertion focuses on student success. A positive relationship with teachers at Coolidge is seen as a key ingredient in attaining success. Various measurements make up success, however, graduating is the ultimate standard. By participating at Coolidge, a chance for success exists. Through participation and commitment, the students feel that they will be successful.

Overarching Theme

A presentation of each of the four major assertions has provided a focus for viewing the overarching theme: Students at Coolidge have established a significant level of informal control within the school. This is supported by the fact that traditional school dropouts are participating as students at Coolidge. The very act of voluntary participation constitutes a

form of control. By going to Coolidge, these students have demonstrated self-control. Informal control of Coolidge is also demonstrated when these same students stay in school. Teachers, through use of formal control, represent the interests of the community. Student control represents the informal needs of a group of young people. Together, teachers and students support the assertion that Coolidge addresses the informal control needs of these youth. Student control is not formally recognized by the community; however, informal recognition is apparent within Coolidge. If Coolidge were identical to the traditional high school, this informal path would not exist for these students. Greater student freedom and the experience of success at Coolidge present paths to informal student control.

Student response to the question of control confirmed the informal status of student input. Debby identified control from a formal viewpoint:

> If they [the students] don't like the school, they can just leave. . . . Well, there's been a lot of people last semester that didn't like it. There's, I think, ten of them that just dropped out. See, so that means that apparently we don't have control.

Another student, Jim, saw a direct linkage of power-to-control at Coolidge, "I really think the students have the power. We give Coolidge the power, just like, supposedly, the people give the government the power." Molly, however, felt uncomfortable with the concept of informal student control:

> Well, actually, us kids are ruling our teachers. We tell them what to do more than they tell us. And I was never brought up like that. You do as you're told.

A pattern of reasoning emerges from the students that the option of leaving Coolidge does not represent a form of informal control. Use of this formal option is definitely a last resort action. Staying at Coolidge involves use of informal control which complements participation. The dynamics of influencing Coolidge can be unsettling for some of these students. Yet, as a group, the students continued to informally exert control and attend Coolidge.

By analyzing patterns within the data, five research findings emerged. These are the overarching theme and four major assertions. Major assertions concerning freedom, choice, behavior, and success support the overarching theme. Traditional high school dropouts are attending Coolidge through their own free-will. These five findings are offered as the primary reasons why.

Further, the overarching theme supports the role of students in determining the effectiveness of the educational process. The perspective of young people can help our understanding of the educational process at work. By recognizing the informal control by students within Coolidge, a valuable source of knowledge is accessed.

EDUCATIONAL IMPORTANCE:

Social policymaking is influenced by a number of factors, one of which is research. Erickson (1976) expressed concern for a potential problem in the use of research by policymakers:

> Social scientific research does not produce certain answers even in "basic" studies, much less in applied "policy" studies. (p. 143)

Research does support informed decision-making by enhancing our understanding. This function should not be confused with the concept of certainty. The distinction made by Erickson is one which the policymaker must be aware of so as to make informed decisions. Viechnicki (1987) considered present public policymaking "a crude instrument for securing societal ideals" (p. 3). Educators are faced with policies which are good in general but fail to provide specific courses of action. Viechnicki referred to the role of research in providing "new perspectives to informal policymaking" (p. 21). Both Erickson and Viechnicki contended that research can provide information to assist policymaking. However, both the desire for certainty from research and the "good in general" characteristic of social policy suggests the need for caution. This study offers one means of assistance to the policymakers search for understanding.

#1 Freedom to Negotiate

Beginning with the first assertion:

> Students at Coolidge experience greater freedom than they previously experienced at a traditional high school.

This finding states that Coolidge is an unconventional school because the students are allowed to behave differently. A review of the characteristics of dropouts reveals an interesting paradox. One perspective is that the characteristics may suggest that the social problem rests with the dropout. A different perspective may suggest that the dropout problem is a by-product of a larger social problem. Treating potential high school dropouts as social mutants in the community is a response which would constrain the expression of freedom. By allowing students at Coolidge to experience greater freedom, a different perspective emerges. These students no longer attend the traditional high school. At Coolidge, though, these same students have attained greater freedom. The question then becomes: Is Coolidge exceeding the standards of freedom as defined by the community?

#2 Student Choice

The next finding addresses the effect of student behavior upon Coolidge:

> Student choice has a positive impact on the effectiveness of Coolidge.

School effectiveness is defined as a school meeting the educational needs of students. In this finding, the assumption is that these students need to choose Coolidge if Coolidge is to be effective. As succinctly expressed by Hodgkinson (1985) "Any youth that is not attending one of the community's recognized majority traditional high schools" can be classified as a

dropout. This definition avoids a number of debates and fits well with this finding. Students at Coolidge are considered dropouts from the traditional high school. Yet, they choose Coolidge. If they graduate with a high school diploma, then Coolidge appears to be effective. In a comparative analysis of youth at an alternative school, Jurgens (1985) summarized the literature concerning choice:

> From the purist's point of view, a school is not truly an alternative school unless the choice for attendance is made solely by the student. (p. 182)

This interpretation is readily accepted by Jurgens without further analysis. From a qualitative perspective, however, the ingredient of choice has a much greater 'meaning' than simply defining the term "alternative school." Further research which explores the relationship of choice to alternative school effectiveness would be appropriate.

#3 Student Monitoring

In the next finding, informal student control is demonstrated:

> Students, as a group at Coolidge, monitor and adjust individual student behavior in relation to acceptable group behavior.

These students want a high school diploma. They also want freedom, choice, and the feeling of being successful. By monitoring and adjusting their behavior, a balance is achieved which permits them to realize their wants. The complexity of variables influencing effective intervention strategies must be

addressed. One conclusion is that no single intervention strategy is going to solve the dropout problem. Through local level design, however, this complex problem can be addressed through a community network of services. The perspective of the youth affected by such a design is essential for this understanding to be comprehensive. Analyzing the common elements of effective local strategies may offer techniques in improving services to dropouts.

#4 Student Success

In this final major assertion, the perspective of the students at Coolidge is more carefully analyzed:

Students enjoy the experience of success at Coolidge. This finding suggests that these students want to feel successful. Further, the feeling of success was absent at the traditional high school. When Coolidge students talk about success, they are sharing their own feelings. By looking inside themselves, they are acknowledging the presence of an internal locus of control. Achieving success is something only the student can accomplish. Coolidge offers caring teachers to facilitate this experience, yet the feeling of success belongs to the students. Riter's (1984) description of locus of control suggested the need to fight a feeling of "passive acceptance of failure" (p. 16). By looking at success as the antidote to failure, students strive to achieve at Coolidge. Acknowledging the presence of an internal locus of control suggests that a more

detailed analysis of this specific aspect may assist efforts to enhance success for dropouts.

#5 Informal Student Control

The overarching theme represents the finding which moves this study into the social policymaking arena:

> Students at Coolidge have established a significant level of informal control within the school.

Student control suggests an ability to have an impact on school policymaking. Although this control is informal, it has important implications. Local policymaking represents the interests of the community. Policies which impact Coolidge ultimately will determine what share of limited community resources Coolidge will receive. However, at what cost does a community support alternative education? The cost to society of dropouts is typically presented in comparison to the costs of various social problems. Community resources are allocated by social-policy decisions. Because these resources are limited, it is essential that Coolidge's services conform to the policy decisions of the community. Through informal control, the students at Coolidge share in the responsibility of conforming to the policies. For Coolidge to be effective, dropouts must be served. Informal control by the students therefore can directly impact the more formal educational standards and policies of the community.

Recommendations

Coolidge Alternative High School is a valuable community resource. Through the efforts of a caring faculty and committed administration, Coolidge serves a population of young people that would be otherwise overlooked. The effectiveness of Coolidge, as measured by the young people in this study, is impressive. Unfortunately, the needs of high school dropouts go beyond Coolidge. Young people continue to dropout of traditional high schools. One solution to this problem is to establish more alternative schools. Another, more meaningful, solution is to improve traditional high schools. Until the traditional high school more effectively educates all young people, alternative high schools must continue to operate.

As a result of this study, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Support alternative schools while reforming traditional schools.

2. Improve the effectiveness of alternative and traditional schools by listening to the needs of dropouts.

3. Train alternative school advisory committees in listening to the needs of dropouts.

4. Support efforts by alternative school faculty in advocating for the needs of dropouts.

5. Train traditional school faculty and administrators in listening to and understanding the needs of students at risk of dropping out.

6. Involve community social policymakers in understanding the issues surrounding the high school dropout problem.

There are distinct implications of this study for social policymakers. Clearly, society cannot bear the social and economic costs associated with the dropout problem. The best solutions to this social problem can be found at the local level. Looking for a non-local solution only diverts attention away from the needs of the dropouts. While the issue of dropouts has been studied previously, the perspective of the dropout at the community level must be heard.

Using applied qualitative research as part of local educational needs assessments can result in more effective intervention strategies. The local policymaker must be willing to listen to the local high school dropout. In doing so, a deeper understanding of the complexity and diversity of the dropout problem is possible. A commitment to act must accompany this descriptive understanding by the local policymaker. With support, local policy implementors can then develop programs which represent the interests of all young people. Only through such understanding and action can education hope to prevent students from dropping out.

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